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ABSTRACT

This study investigated gender differences in students' writing self-efficacy beliefs, writing attitudes, writing preferences, and gendered perceptions about writing in the New Zealand School Certificate English classroom (year 11). The aim of this study was also to identify factors which may contribute to the negative affect and poor performance of boys in writing. The results indicated a gender difference in writing attitudes, with boys reporting a higher level of negative writing satisfaction, and less writing enjoyment in the English classroom. Boys and girls reported distinct differences for their first and second preferred writing options. No significant gender differences were reported in students' self-efficacy beliefs or predicted confidence judgments to perform specific writing competencies. No significant gender differences were reported in students' perceptions about writing as an inherently gender-biased activity, and students did not perceive writing to be an inherently feminine or masculine activity. However, they did indicate an awareness of differential outcomes for boys' and girls' writing in the way in which their respective discourses were regarded and valued by others. An examination of qualitative data and frequency of response to individual target questions indicates that students expect the writing of boys and girls to be differentially valued in the English classroom and in School Certificate. Finally, the need to examine if boys' writing dissatisfactions and negative attitudes in English are connected with the way writing elements and activities have been pedagogically and ideologically constructed, is considered. Further research focusing on how writing is presented and measured in the English classroom is recommended. (Contains 62 references and a table of data.) (RS)

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Title: Boys and Writing: Reluctance? Reticence? Or Rebellion?

Overview

This study examines gender differences in writing at year 11 (School Certificate) in New Zealand English classrooms, and attempts to determine if there is a relationship between social and gender writing attitudes, writing preferences and perceptions and writing self-efficacy beliefs. It also examines the writing ideology and pedagogy of the New Zealand English Curriculum, and how this may be manifested in the traditional New Zealand secondary English classroom.

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Abstract

This study investigated gender differences in students' writing self-efficacy beliefs, writing attitudes, writing preferences and gendered perceptions about writing in the New Zealand School Certificate English classroom (year 11). The aim of this study was to determine whether boys an girls differ in their writing self-beliefs, writing attitudes, writing preferences and gendered perceptions about writing, and to identify factors which may contribute to the negative affect and poor performance of boys in writing.

The results indicated a gender difference in writing attitudes, with boys reporting a higher level of negative writing satisfaction, and less writing enjoyment in the English classroom. Gender differences were also indicated in terms of the writing genres boys and girls prefer to engage in. Boys and girls reported distinct differences for their first and second preferred writing options. No significant gender differences were reported in students' self-efficacy beliefs or predicted confidence judgements to perform specific writing competencies. No significant gender differences were reported in students' perceptions about writing as an inherently gender-biased activity.

Results indicated the students in this study did not perceive writing to be an inherently feminine or masculine activity. However, they did indicate an awareness of differential outcomes for boys' and girls' writing in the way in which their respective discourses were regarded and valued by others. The findings are discussed in terms of gender-based attitudinal writing differences and writing preferences. An examination of qualitative data and frequency of response to individual target questions indicates that students expect the writing of boys and girls to be differentially valued in the English classroom and in School Certificate.

Finally, the need to examine if boys' writing dissatisfactions and negative attitudes in English are connected with the way writing elements and activities have been pedagogically and ideologically constructed, is considered. Further research focusing on how writing is presented and measured in the English classroom is recommended.

The Context

The initiation for this study was motivated by current educational and public focus on the 'underachievement' of boys in the subject English, reflected in the widening gender disparity of School Certificate English results. Research in New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom reveals that one of the most alarming academic gender disparities exists in the domain of writing.

Current educational discussions and debates (see ERO's *The Achievement of Boys*,1999) have suggested that there are gender differences in learning behaviours and that boys learn and respond in different ways, and achieve best with different teaching styles than girls. According to the ERO report, boys show greater adaptability to more traditional approaches to learning which emphasise memorisation of facts and rules, and are "willing to sacrifice deep understanding, which requires sustained effort, for correct answers achieved at speed" (p 9). This difference in learning behaviour thus manifests itself in writing with girls seeming more able to produce what the teacher had in mind, and boys tending to need more help with structuring and organising ideas. The reported gender difference in reading and writing preferences, with girls tending to prefer narrative reading and boys preferring non-fiction, must also be considered as a difference in literacy learning behaviour.

Moreover, there is a current widely held belief that the idea of 'masculinity' that is reinforced in our schools, and in the wider community, may not encourage the worthiness and value of such subjects as English. Thus boys may view activities such as writing as being 'feminised' and not holding value for them. According to researchers in this area (Biddulph,1996; Martino,1997; Lemon,1997; Newkirk,2000), the 'feminine' environment within schools may have an influence on boys' behaviour, as well as on their learning. Further, that the values traditionally associated with, and promoted in the English classroom, may be in direct opposition with traditional constructs of masculinity thus making literacy practices particularly aversive to males.

The Aims

The principal aim of this study was to determine whether boys and girls differ in their writing self-beliefs, writing attitudes, writing preferences and gendered perceptions about writing, and to identify factors which may adversely contribute to the negative affect and poor performance of boys in writing in the English classroom at year 11. A secondary aim was to identify possible links between any elements of gender disparity and the related possible sources.

The Research Design

A 51 item questionnaire was administered in July (2000) to 215 students in 10 School Certificate English classes attending eight secondary schools drawn from three main regional areas. The sample was representative of a range of socio-economic levels (SES 2-9 inclusive), ethnic distribution and rural and urban mix. One school in the sample was a single sex boys' school, the others were all co-educational schools. The range of ability was established by teacher ratings of students on a 1-4 scale,

with 1 being a very competent writer and 4 having difficulty with writing. Teacher ratings across the whole sample indicted that the ability range was consistent with, and representative of, a national distribution.

The Writing Questionnaire, which included selected items from the Daly and Miller Writing Apprehension Test (1975) and the Shell et al. Writing Skills Self-Efficacy Scale (1989), asked students to agree or disagree with statements pertaining to writing (and reading) activities, themselves as writers, social and educational perceptions about writing, their confidence to perform specific writing competencies and ranking writing activities in preference order. The questionnaire also allowed for students to make personal anecdotal comments about writing. This qualitative data was used to reinforce the findings of the empirical quantitative data.

The Results

A principal components analysis and a number of varimax rotations of the items in the Writing Questionnaire established a three factor solution. Items that had a coefficient of less than .40 or that loaded on more than one factor, were deleted from the scale. The resulting three factor structure was maintained and explained 39% of the total variance. An examination of the content of items in each of the factor descriptors led to the following factor descriptions: Factor 1, ***Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs***; Factor 2, ***Writing Attitudes;*** Factor3, ***Gendered Perceptions***.

Writing Preferences were assessed by item 51 on the Writing Questionnaire which asked respondents to rank ten writing tasks in a 1-10 priority order of personal writing preference. This item was then analysed by number of frequency of responses using gender as a variable. The 10 activities were selected as representative of conventional tasks which are set in a Year 11 English classroom in response to the

requirements of the three written strands of the English Curriculum (e.g., writing a narrative adventure story; writing a factual account about a school event; writing a poem: see table 1).

Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs

No significant gender differences were reported in students' writing self-efficacy beliefs or predicted confidence judgements to perform specific writing competencies. Although the teacher ratings indicated that more girls were very competent writers than boys, this did not translate into a loss of confidence or low self-efficacy beliefs for the boys in comparison to the girls. This pattern of positive response from both boys and girls was consistent with the frequency of response to the statement *"I consider myself to be a good reader"*. Seventy percent of the total sample positively agreed with this statement, suggesting a high level of reading self-efficacy beliefs from both boys and girls.

Frequency of response to individual items pertaining to specific writing competencies indicated consistent positive agreement. Sixty-seven % of the total sample reported that they could " *write a story with a clear opening, middle and end*" and 67% of the total sample agreed that they could " *describe an event with vivid words and images"*.

A consistent pattern of total sample response was reported for all items pertaining to writing-specific competencies. None of the anecdotal comments from boys were related to issues about writing self-efficacy beliefs, whereas several of the girls' comments indicated a concern with spelling, vocabulary, and getting good grades.

In summary, girls and boys reported similar writing self-efficacy beliefs regarding both reading and writing. Only girls offered anecdotal evidence suggesting concern with item-specific writing competencies.

Writing Attitudes

The results indicated a significant gender difference in writing attitudes, with boys reporting a higher level of negative writing satisfaction, and less writing enjoyment in the English classroom. Boys were also less positive about the perceived usefulness and value of writing.

It was revealing that 88% of the total sample gave a positive response to the item " *I want to be a good writer* " ; 85% positively agreed to the item that stated *"Writing is an important skill to have"*, but only 16% of the total sample positively agreed that "*People who are good writers get the best jobs.* " Clearly, many students recognise that writing is an important skill to have, but this does not always translate into to success in the employment or job market.

In terms of reading behaviour, 70% of the total sample positively agreed with the item " *I consider myself to be a good reader* " and 82% of the total sample agreed that the books read in English class were more suited to boys. Clearly, teachers have responded to the English Curriculum encouragements to provide gender inclusive content.

In general, comments from boys and girls reflected different attitudes towards writing. Whereas girls tended to express positive writing enjoyment and engagement and a concern with writing success, boys almost invariably stated that writing was unappealing and unrewarding for them.

Gendered Perceptions about Writing

No significant differences were reported in students' perceptions about writing as an inherently gender-biased activity. The students in this sample did not perceive writing to be an innately 'feminine' or 'masculine' activity. However, they did indicate an awareness of differential outcomes for boys' and girls' writing in the way in which their respective writing was valued by others in the classroom and beyond.

There was an 88% positive response to item 18 which stated that " *Boys achieve just as well as girls in writing tasks* ", but only 9% positively agreed with item 24 which stated that "*The writing tasks we do in English are more suited to boys*". And 90% of the total sample disagreed with item 26 which stated that " *People seem to prefer the writing that boys do*." Clearly, students are aware that there are distinct categories of' boys' writing and girls' writing and, furthermore, they seem acutely aware that the boys' writing style is not the preferred one.

It is interesting to note that, although there was a high level of recognition from the total sample regarding the differential value accorded to the writing of boys and girls, boys did not report apprehension about assessment of their writing as a significant negative affective factor. In other words, they did not report a direct relationship between their diminished sense of writing satisfaction and prior, or potential, poor writing grades.

Writing Preferences

Gender differences were indicated in terms of the writing genres and activities girls and boys prefer to engage with in the English classroom. Boys and girls reported distinct differences in their preferences for their first and second options. Boys' favourite writing activity was writing a narrative adventure story, and second

preference was writing a science fiction/fantasy story. Girls reported that writing a poem was their favourite writing activity, and recalling and writing a childhood memory was their second option.

Table 1 Writing preferences showing gender rankings

Activity	Male	Female
Narrative adventure story	1	4
Factual account	9	8
Personal feeling	8	5
Poem	7	1
Child memory	5	2
Review	4	6
Speech/debate	10	10
Science fiction story	2	7
Instructions	6	9
Description	3	3

Contrary to popular theories about boys' preferences in reading and writing (ie. that boys prefer non-fiction, information texts), the male students in this sample did not rate transactional writing activities (e.g. writing a factual account) above expressive/poetic writing activities. In fact the first three preferred options selected by boys fit comfortably in the poetic/expressive writing functions of the New Zealand English Curriculum rather than the transactional. It was also interesting to note that

both genders rated writing a prepared speech/debate as their least preferred writing activity.

In their anecdotal comments, many boys offered negative responses which reflected a common disenchantment and dissatisfaction with writing and the expected values and outcomes it held for them. " Writing sux" was a common catchphrase from boys across a range of abilities in the sample. Only two boys offered positive comments about writing. It was disturbing to note that even boys rated as very competent writers reported the same level of dissatisfaction as less able students.

A sense of reading enjoyment was reported by both genders, but both girls and boys suggested that there was a need to have more exciting adventure books in the English classroom. One boy commented: *" We should read more adventure and interesting adult books by serious authors like Wilbur Smith and John Grisham"*. This sentiment was echoed by both girls and boys from across a range of abilities.

Many of the girls displayed an anxiety about writing in terms of assessment and 'pleasing' the teacher which was not a feature of the boys' comments at all. Many girls, across a range of abilities, expressed a genuine and positive enjoyment of writing, both inside the English classroom and beyond.

Conclusion/ Discussion

This present study indicates that it is *attitudes* which may be influencing writing achievement for some boys. These attitudes relate to boys' beliefs about the value of writing outcomes, and the sense of satisfaction writing engenders for them. Boys do not consider writing to be an inherently 'feminised' activity and, moreover, they express a desire to be good at writing. The real satisfaction gap for many boys seems to exist between the desire to achieve in writing and realising a sense of

satisfaction from that achievement. While many boys believe they have the requisite writing skills, they acknowledge that such skills do not translate into writing success and satisfaction.

The boys in this study tended to attribute their writing negativity to writing-related factors such as lack of interest or perceived value, and not to a lack of self-confidence in their writing ability. Thus the negative writing attitudes reported by boys in this research seem to spring, not from the activity of writing per se, but more from a perception about the usefulness and value of writing, and a lack of opportunity to have the types of writing boys like to do equally recognised with the types of writing girls like to do.

Both *The Achievement of Boys* (ERO, 1999, p. 9) and *Promoting Boys' Achievement* (ERO, 2000) suggest that to be effective in meeting the learning needs of boys, teachers need to "review curriculum plans to ensure that the strengths of boys (and girls) are being sufficiently challenged and developed." The findings of this study confirm this stated need to review the English Curriculum with specific reference to the writing sub-strand, particularly the expressive and poetic writing functions. Moreover, in the conventional English classroom, many boys may be handicapped because the writing styles which they claim to prefer in this study are not those generally encouraged or valued in the English classroom.

The English Curriculum clearly states the expectations for writing achievement, and implied with this is a statement about the 'style' of writing which will earn good marks. Knowledge and awareness of such writing style expectations serves no purpose if a student knows that he cannot reproduce what is required, and more importantly, that he is not motivated to do so. It is possible that some boys express negative writing attitudes, not because they dislike the act of writing, but that

the act of writing does not reward them either in the classroom or in examinations. Moreover, writing styles preferred by girls may be more likely to realise reward in the English classroom.

This study indicates that boys do not consider writing to be a girls' activity and, moreover, they express a desire to be good at writing. The real satisfaction gap for many boys seems to exist between the desire to achieve in writing and realising a sense of satisfaction from that achievement. While many boys believe they have the requisite writing skills, and many of the boys in this sample clearly were competent writers, they acknowledge that such skills do not translate into writing success and satisfaction.

Both ERO reports encourage teachers to "celebrate the achievement of boys and girls" (1999, p. 9). However, such a 'celebration' can only be realised in the English classroom, if the writing preferences of both boys and girls are validly and equally promoted, encouraged and recognised through teaching practices and associated curriculum activities and assessments.

In the present climate, science fiction or narrative adventure story writing (the two preferred options for boys) do not rate as highly as 'the sense of personal voice' expressive/poetic type writing that is encouraged in the senior English class. An examination of the School Certificate marking schedule indicates that a sense of personal voice is the clear prerequisite for a top piece of writing. It is also clearly stated as an achievement objective for expressive writing at all levels. The New Zealand English Curriculum assumes that expressive writing will provide the basis for poetic writing and thus implies that "a sense of personal voice" will be fostered by English teachers as the essential ingredient of effective writing.

The stated gender difference in writing preferences raises some questions about the balance of these in the writing content and design in the English Curriculum and the English classroom: Are there equal opportunities for a range of writing genres and styles in the English classroom? Do all writing genres, particularly in Poetic/Expressive writing, hold the same value both in the classroom and in the national external assessment system? Do boys, through experience, know that the types of writing they want to do and prefer to do, are not as highly valued in the English classroom as some other types? And does this knowledge then negatively influence their motivation and their self regulation for learning in the English classroom?

The current world-wide focus on literacy has motivated English teachers to broaden their range of teaching texts to include a more dynamic mix of film and multimedia hypertext within their English programmes. Such a shift in teaching resources and practices must signal an examination of curriculum and assessment practices. If science/fantasy virtual reality film texts are being used in English classrooms to motivate and engage students, then such narrative models must be embraced and valued in student writing.

The consistent negative writing responses from boys right across the total sample suggests that there is a problem inherent in the way we 'package' , "deliver' and 'measure' writing. I believe it is imperative that we continue to explore factors which contribute to this negative writing affect reported by many boys, and that we examine the way that English in the New Zealand Curriculum, and associated assessment models derived from it, constructs the writing substrand.

We need to question whether there are prejudicial preconceived notions about preferred writing styles that may be hidden barriers for boys in writing, and ensure

that equal gender opportunities are provided, both in the English classroom and in national assessments. Providing more opportunities for boys to read and write in the genres of their stated preferences, can only serve to close the gender gap if the associated assessment practices also encourage'equitable outcomes across a range of writing styles. It may be that we have, unwittingly, created a lose/lose situation for many boys in the domain of writing in terms of favoured writing styles and assessment ideology.

The English Curriculum clearly states the expectations for writing achievement and implied with this is a statement about the 'style' of writing which will earn good marks. Knowledge and awareness of such writing style expectations serves no purpose if one knows that they cannot reproduce what is required, and more importantly, that one is not motivated to do so. It is possible that some boys express negative writing attitudes not because they dislike the act of writing, but that the act of writing does not reward them either in the classroom or in examinations.

The results of this study suggest that the focus for future educational direction in writing practice and theory, needs to be on changing boys' writing attitudes through enhancing and broadening writing opportunities, thus ensuring that boys' positive writing self-efficacy beliefs can lead to positive writing performance and outcomes. The move towards a standards-based assessment model, and away from a comparative norm-referenced one with the introduction of Achievement Standards and the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in New Zealand, may alleviate the tendency to measure gender groups against each other, and thus permit boys and girls to achieve independently, in a system where excellence and difference in writing styles is celebrated equally.

Recommendations for Future Research

In concluding, the following directions for future research in gender writing differences in New Zealand schools and elsewhere are recommended: Firstly, there should be an examination of the ideological and pedagogical construction of writing, as it is defined by EINZC, and associated assessment policies and practices. The aim of such a study would be to identify any implicit prejudices pertaining to writing, and to ensure that all writing genres and styles are given equal consideration. Such a study would need to examine the compatibility between the encouragement to expose students to a wider range of literary models (ERO, 1999; 2000), and the assessment models used to measure students' writing responses and outcomes in relation to this exposure. The New Zealand English Curriculum assumes it as a given that effective crafted writing will be that which has 'a sense of personal voice'. This underpinning assumption may need to be questioned and challenged in terms of its validity and appropriateness for evaluating student writing.

Secondly, students construct a sense of self as readers and writers within the culture of each particular classroom, and these constructions are salient to students' developments of motivation for literacy learning. English teachers play a pivotal role in informing, and shaping, the constructions students create about themselves as writers. For this reason, teachers' perceptions and prejudices about writing, and the value they place on different writing styles should be examined in terms of the mediating influence teacher beliefs may have on how writing is presented, monitored, and rewarded in the English classroom.

Thirdly, there should be an examination of what boys are getting right in writing. Samples of boys' writing should be scrutinised and analysed in terms of

writing competencies, effectiveness, and patterns and trends of writing styles. The introduction to New Zealand of The National Certificate in Educational Achievement (2002) with the use of Achievement Standards as a national assessment measure, could provide both a timely and appropriate platform for such a study.

Finally, a follow up study of students' writing preferences and beliefs about the perceived value of those preferences in the wider context of written expression would be useful to further substantiate, and extend this study. In line with this is the need to examine and evaluate classroom writing practices in terms of how they translate into economic and social skill-based currencies in the wider world outside the English classroom.

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